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Weekly Review

Special Report

Soviet Naval Operations in the Indian Ocean

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Soviet Naval Operations In the Indian Ocean

Summary

During the last six years, the Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean has slowly but steadily grown, enabling Moscow to buttress its image as a super power in the eyes of most littoral states.

The principal objective of the Soviet naval force is to maintain adequate military strength in the Indian Ocean to counter—or at least appear to counter—moves made by Western naval forces there, particularly those of the US. The Soviets have sent additional ships to the Indian Ocean whenever a major US buildup has occurred there, such as during the India-Pakistan war in 1971 and the Middle East war in 1973.

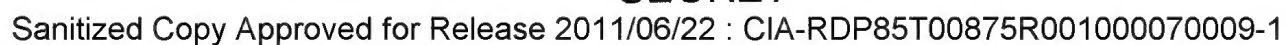
The Soviets normally prefer to maintain a relatively small naval force in the Indian Ocean, sufficient to maintain the USSR's image as a super power, but which can be strengthened if the need arises. This policy gives them the capability to "signal" their concern during crises and avoids some of the political and economic costs of a larger presence. To support their naval forces, the Soviets have acquired varying degrees of access to facilities along the littoral.

The Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean will probably continue to grow at a slow rate, commensurate with the navy's expanding naval operations in other areas, unless there is a major increase in the US military presence there. Moscow has demonstrated that it would attempt to match any large increase in US forces, even if it means drawing down forces in other regions.

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Growth of the Soviet Force

A Soviet warship first visited the Indian Ocean area in early 1965, when the USSR sent one destroyer to the Red Sea via the Suez Canal for the Ethiopian Navy Day celebration at Massawa. Similar visits to Massawa were made in 1966 and 1967.

The Soviet navy did not begin to keep ships in the Indian Ocean on a nearly continuous basis until March 1968, when four ships from Vladivostok made a good will visit along the littoral. Such good will cruises were the principal activity through late 1969. Since then, the Indian Ocean force has spent most of its time in the north-western portion of the ocean, where the Soviets have had the most success in acquiring use of port facilities.

Although the number of countries visited annually has decreased since 1969, the general expansion of the naval force and the increased use of a few ports on a routine basis have resulted in an overall increase in the number of port calls. Sixty-five percent of the 1973 port calls, however, were to Berbera, reflecting the USSR's development and use of the Somali facility for naval support as well as problems experienced in gaining diplomatic clearance for routine port visits elsewhere.

The growth in Soviet naval deployments to the Indian Ocean since 1968 has been gradual, but relatively steady—except for the period of the India-Pakistan war in 1971 and the Middle East War last fall. Soviet general purpose* naval ship-days in the Indian Ocean increased from about 1,000 in 1968 to 5,000 in 1973, and the normal force grew from two surface warships and an auxiliary to five surface warships, a submarine, and six auxiliaries.

**Excludes ballistic missile submarine, oceanographic, and space support ship activity.*

Soviet Objectives

The countries of the Indian Ocean area—as distinct from those of the Middle East—have a lower priority than the US, China, or Europe in the USSR's diplomatic, economic, and military initiatives. Moscow has no interests in the region comparable to the West's vital interest in Persian Gulf oil.

Nevertheless, the Indian Ocean has clearly become another arena, albeit on a small scale, of the global US-Soviet rivalry, and Moscow's long-range strategic objectives there are to win influence at the expense of the West as well as to limit the future role of China. Toward these goals, the Soviets use their naval presence as one element in a combined approach that utilizes political, economic, and military aid activity as well.

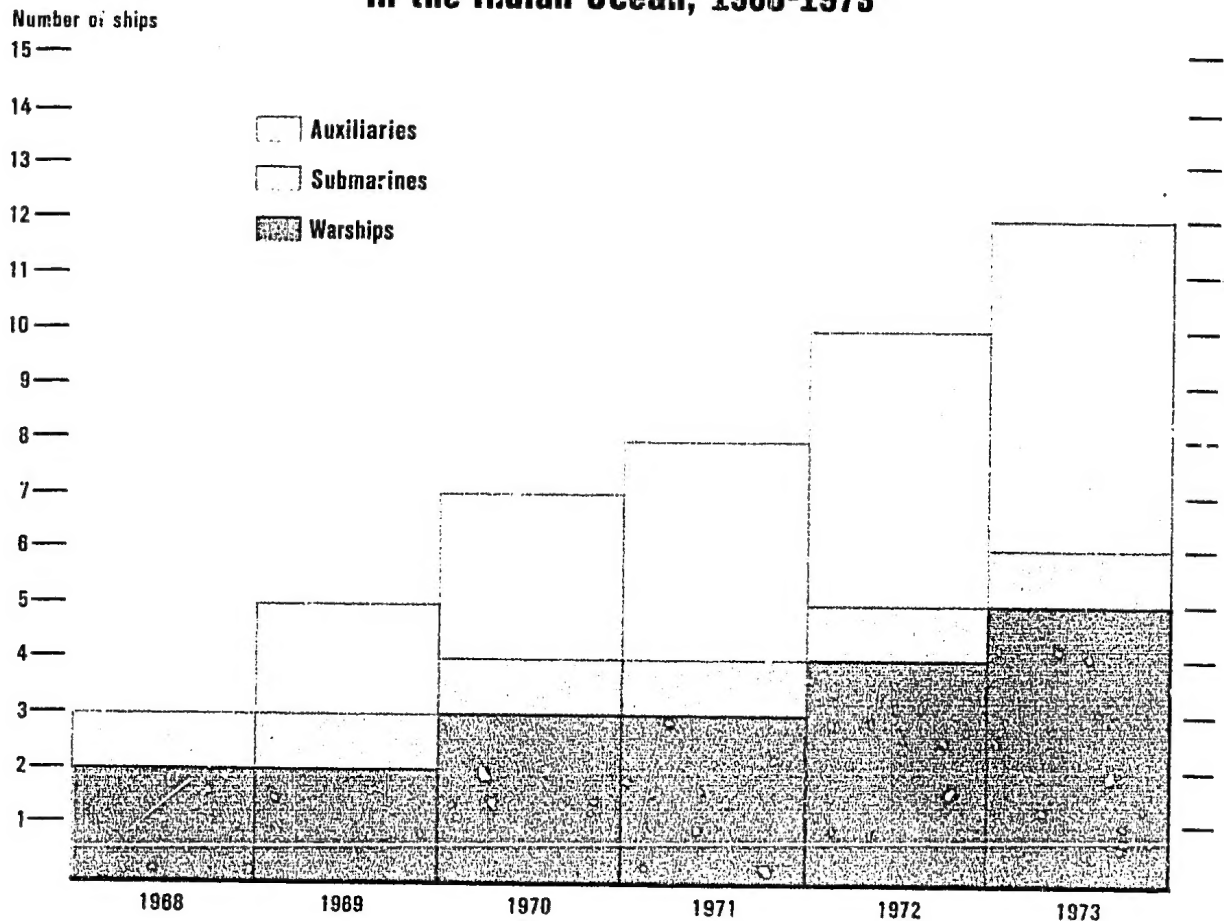
Moscow also perceives the Indian Ocean as a potential area of strategic weapons deployment and has indicated concern over possible operations by US Polaris submarines there.

The sea lanes to and through the Indian Ocean are useful to the Soviets, but not essential to their economy. Only a fraction of foreign-bound cargos and domestic Soviet freight passes this way. The Soviets, however, recognize the importance to the West of Persian Gulf oil and of the sea lanes between the Gulf and Europe or Japan. Moscow also sees the recent increases in the US naval presence in the Indian Ocean as tied to the oil question. Nevertheless, the normal composition of the Soviet force there—especially the lack of a significant submarine contingent—suggests that interdiction of Western commerce, particularly oil shipments from the Persian Gulf, is not a major objective.

Nor does the Soviet naval combatant presence appear to be designed for direct military intervention in littoral states. The forces sent there have little capability for intervention ashore.

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Normal Levels of Soviet General Purpose Naval Forces in the Indian Ocean, 1968-1973*



*Excludes ballistic missile submarine, oceanographic, and space support ship activity.
Data for 1972 and 1973 exclude harbor and mine clearing activity in Bangladesh.

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The principal objective of the Soviet naval force in the Indian Ocean is to provide a counter—at least in the eyes of littoral states—to the presence of US forces. The Soviets, however, have maintained a lower tempo of naval activity in the Indian Ocean than in the Atlantic Ocean or Mediterranean Sea. The vessels spend 80 percent of their time at anchor or in port. The Soviet naval force stationed there has been relatively small, generally made up of older units lacking in modern antisubmarine warfare or air defense equipment. Moscow, however, probably has viewed its naval presence as at least adequate to create an image of naval equality with what has been in the past a normally small US force.

Composition of the Soviet Force

By mid-1973, Soviet general purpose naval units conducting routine operations in the Indian Ocean usually were composed of five surface warships—one destroyer, two destroyer escorts, two minesweepers, and an amphibious ship—as well as a diesel submarine and six auxiliary support ships, including a merchant tanker.

Since the Middle East war of October 1973, the number of Soviet ships has increased in reaction to the movements of US carrier task forces into the ocean, reaching a high point of 13 warships and submarines in February 1974. A subsequent decline was offset, at least partially, by the recent arrival of seven Soviet minesweepers from the Pacific to conduct mine-clearing operations in the Gulf of Suez, as well as the helicopter ship Leningrad. The mine-clearing activity, however, like the recently completed harbor-clearing operations in Bangladesh, is more in the nature of foreign aid programs than an increase in the Soviet naval capabilities in the Indian Ocean. The Bangladesh operation involved at one time as many as 13 Soviet ships and lasted from April 1972 to June 1974. After the first few months, the force decreased in size to an average of two minesweepers and seven auxiliaries.

In addition to the operations of general purpose naval forces, the Soviets usually have one hydrographic research ship and one or two space-support vessels in the area. These ships are

normally not considered part of a military presence, although they do make frequent "show the flag" port calls along the Indian Ocean littoral. Since the Middle East war in 1973, however, space-support ships and their shipborne helicopters have conducted surveillance of US carriers in the Indian Ocean.

The Soviet warships and submarines sent to the Indian Ocean normally come from the Pacific Fleet, which is also the primary source for logistic support. Units from the western fleets, however, have normally operated in the Indian Ocean for a few months in the course of transferring to the Pacific. The Indian Ocean has become, in effect, a "southern sea route" for the interfleet transfer of naval units. About one fourth of the Soviet warships and submarines that have operated there have been units transferring to the Pacific from the western fleets.

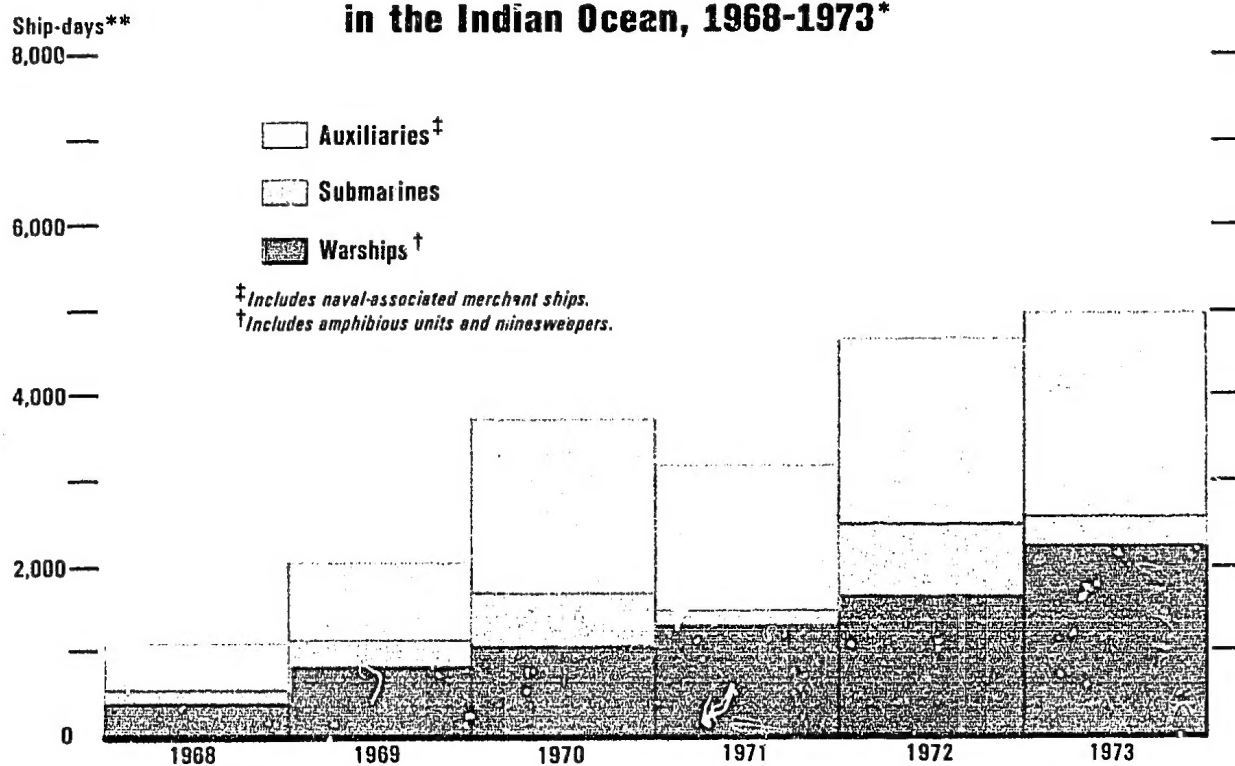
A modernization of the USSR's Pacific Fleet naval forces is currently under way. Since early 1974, the Soviet force in the Indian Ocean has included modern anticarrier and antisubmarine units transferring to the Pacific from Soviet western fleets. These ships have provided a more impressive naval presence than would have been possible a year ago. The Soviet Pacific Fleet, as a result of the modernization, will have available more modern ships, some of which could conduct routine operations in the Indian Ocean.

Soviet warships now appear to be spending more time in the Indian Ocean—suggesting that they have overcome some of their logistic problems. Recent tours have been for about a year, compared with five to six months in the past.

Soviet Support Facilities

Until the facilities at the small Somali port of Berbera on the Gulf of Aden became available in 1973, the Soviets relied almost exclusively on "floating bases"—collections of auxiliary ships usually anchored in international waters—to provide support to their Indian Ocean naval forces. The anchorages most frequently used are near the barren island of Socotra, and in the Chagos Archipelago, about 1,000 nautical miles south of

Operations of General Purpose Naval Forces in the Indian Ocean, 1968-1973*



* Excludes ballistic missile submarine, oceanographic, and space support ship activity.
 Data for 1972 and 1973 exclude harbor and mine clearing activity in Bangladesh.

** The term "ship-days" refers to the number of days spent by each vessel in a particular area.

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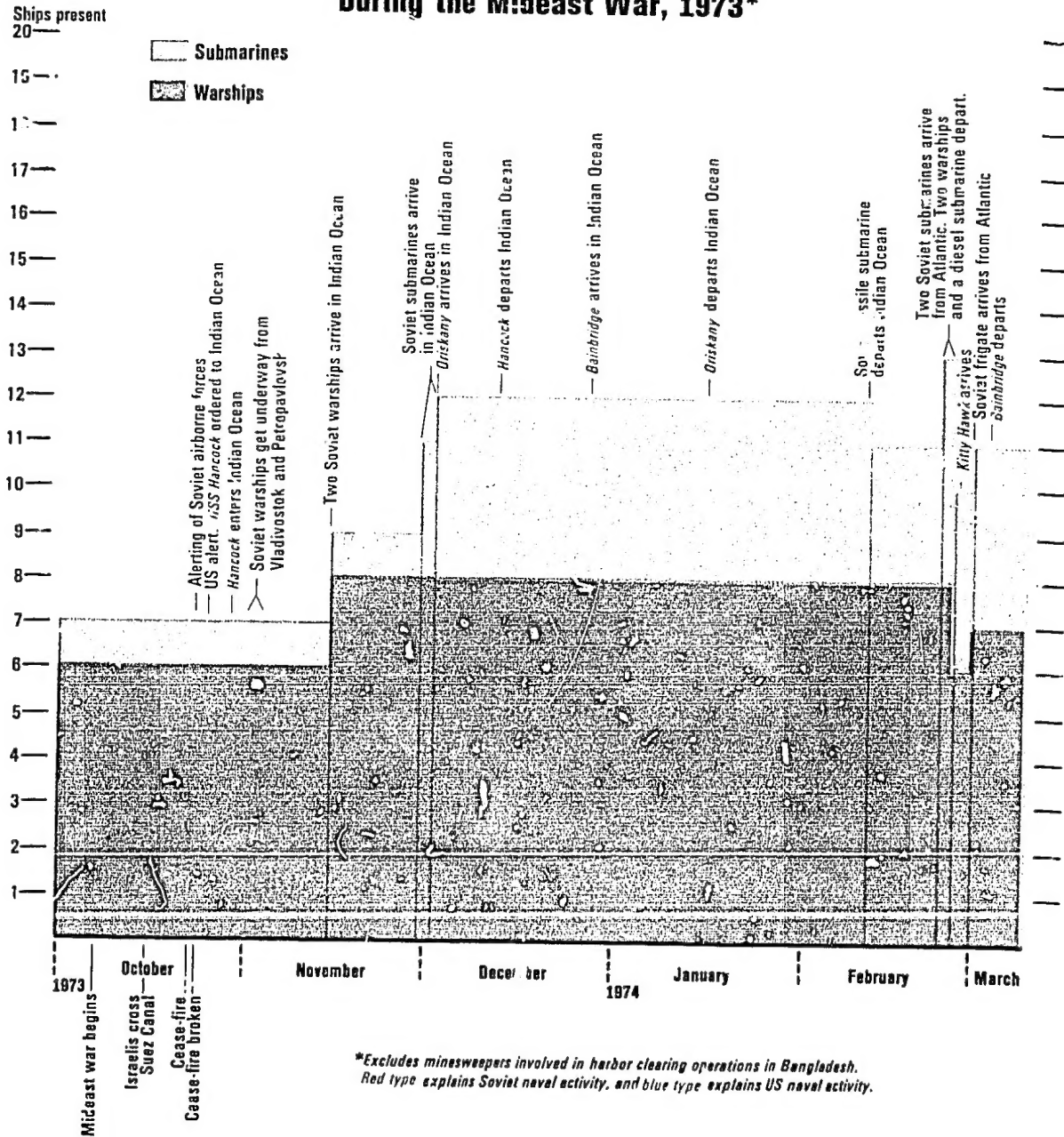
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Soviet Warship and Submarine Operations in the Indian Ocean During the Mideast War, 1973*



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year, Moscow has been attempting to gain use of certain Indian airfields and ports for space-support operations, but New Delhi has set conditions upon this usage that it knows are unacceptable to the Soviets. The USSR has sent research ships, support ships, and an occasional warship to Sri Lanka and Mauritius to test reactions to a Soviet naval presence. In addition, Soviet ships may eventually call at Chittagong where Soviet harbor clearing operations recently ended. Routine access by Soviet ships to these facilities, however, is not likely to be granted.

Soviet Response in Crises

The Soviets apparently prefer to maintain in the area a relatively small naval force—but one adequate to maintain their image of naval equality with the West. Such a force can be strengthened, thus providing a “signaling” capability during crises and avoiding the political and economic costs of a larger, continuous presence.

Moscow has emphasized its sensitivity to major changes in the size and capabilities of Western naval forces in the Indian Ocean by sending additional ships to the area whenever a US buildup has occurred—such as the India-Pakistan war of 1971 and the October 1973 Middle East war. The timing of these ships' movements (see charts) indicates that the Soviets were responding primarily to moves by the US and other Western countries rather than initiating a unilateral buildup.

Effect of Reopening the Suez Canal

The reopening of the Suez Canal will improve Soviet naval flexibility by substantially shortening the transit time to the western Indian Ocean from the Black and Mediterranean seas. The reduction would not be great enough in itself to cause a significant increase in the number of ship-days on station in the Indian Ocean. It would, however, reduce the logistic problem of supporting an Indian Ocean presence.

A few warships from the Mediterranean Squadron probably will be periodically rotated to

SOVIET PORT CALLS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN^a

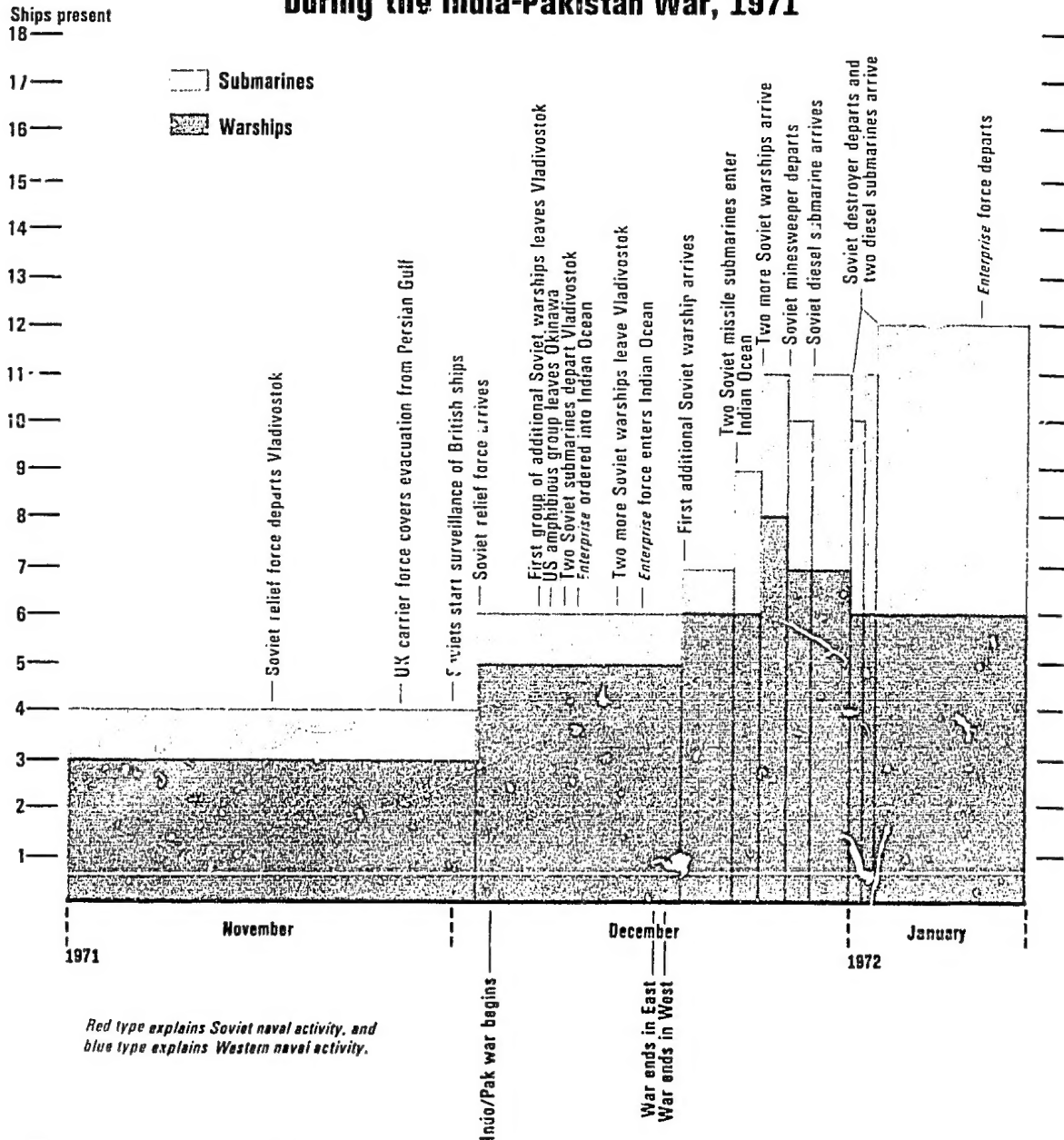
	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973
Ethiopia	0	1	1	1	1	1
India	8	2	6	1	4	7
Iran	3	7	0	2	2	0
Iraq	3	8	2	11	14	16
Kenya	5	0	3	0	2	4
Kuwait	0	1	0	0	0	0
Malagasy Republic	0	1	0	0	0	0
Maldives	1	1	0	1	0	1
Mauritius	2	4	17	5	20	11
Pakistan	2	2	2	0	0	0
Seychelles	0	0	0	0	3	0
Somalia ^b	3	13	18	11	38	97
South Yemen (PDRY)	4	13	7	13	12	7
Sri Lanka	4	8	2	2	14	9
Sudan	0	2	0	2	0	0
Tanzania	4	2	2	0	0	0
Egypt (ARE)	3	1	0	0	0	0
Yemen	0	2	3	0	0	0
Number of Port Calls per year	42	63	63	49	110	153
Number of Countries Visited each year	12	16	11	10	10	9

a. “Port calls” reflect every entry of each Soviet naval ship into a foreign port but do not reflect the duration of the visits, which varied from one day to twenty months. Port calls by oceanographic research and space event support ships are included in the totals because the data available for 1968 through 1971 are not categorized by ship. Singapore is not included in the table because it is a Pacific Ocean port. However, Soviet ships from the Indian Ocean occasionally call there, and Soviet naval auxiliaries are overhauled in Singapore's shipyards. In addition, ships engaged in long-term harbor clearing operations in Bangladesh are not considered to be conducting routine port calls and therefore are not included.

b. The large increase in visits to Somalia since 1971 reflects the USSR's development and use of the port of Berbera for naval support. Most of the remaining port visits in the Indian Ocean—particularly those by combatants—were undertaken for diplomatic purposes.

the Indian Ocean when the canal opens. Typical rotations could include two destroyers, accompanied by a naval auxiliary. Any ships sent there via the Suez Canal would probably operate largely in the vicinity of the Horn of Africa, where Soviet naval activity has been concentrated for the past few years. Because the Black Sea Fleet is heavily committed to supporting operations in the Mediterranean, however, most of the surface ships and probably all of the submarines for routine tours in the Indian Ocean would come from the Soviet Pacific Fleet. With a reopened canal, auxiliary ships could be drawn from the Black Sea and the Pacific on a nearly equal basis for support of the Indian Ocean forces.

Soviet Warship and Submarine Operations in the Indian Ocean During the India-Pakistan War, 1971



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Other important naval benefits of a reopened canal would be the easier transfer of Soviet ships from the western fleets to the Pacific Ocean Fleet and delivery of military aid to client states in the area east of the Suez.

The most significant result of the canal's opening, however, would be a new Soviet capability to reinforce on short notice their naval presence from their Mediterranean and Black Sea naval force in a crisis. On the other hand, the USSR probably recognizes that the Suez Canal is subject to closure in a crisis. The Soviets would not wish to be caught with a substantial portion of available units on the wrong end of a blocked canal, and in considering this contingency, they almost certainly would give priority to the Mediterranean.

Looking to the Future

If there is no permanent increase in US naval forces in the area, a slow but steady growth in the Soviet Indian Ocean force—one to two warships a year—seems likely. Such a rate is in line with the growth of Soviet naval operations worldwide. In addition, from Moscow's viewpoint, such a measured approach would be in keeping with Soviet capabilities and would be less likely to evoke criticism from littoral countries.

The planned expansion of US facilities on Diego Garcia and the announced long-term increase of US warships—particularly attack cruisers—in the Indian Ocean, however, would probably lead to a much more rapid growth in the Soviet naval presence.

Soviet capabilities to station and support a vastly increased naval force in the Indian Ocean, however, are limited by a variety of factors. The first is the distance and steaming time from the various Soviet fleets to the Indian Ocean—even with a reopened Suez Canal. Another important consideration is the availability of basing facilities.

In the near term, at least, the Soviets are unlikely to acquire substantially better naval support facilities for their ships in the Indian Ocean

area. Routine access to large shore facilities—such as those in Singapore, India, Sri Lanka, or South Yemen—for major repair and overhaul of warships is unlikely. The limited facilities that are currently available, such as in Berbera and to a lesser extent Umm Qasr, would require considerable development and probably changes in the host countries' policies to support such a buildup.

The Soviets probably also hope to increase their capabilities for air reconnaissance in the Indian Ocean. Prospects for access are best in Somalia, where Soviet technicians are helping to construct airfields at Berbera and near Mogadiscio. Even in light of the recent friendship treaty, the Soviets are unlikely to acquire permanent basing rights in Somalia, but they may be able to operate aircraft from there on an occasional basis. TU-95 naval reconnaissance aircraft staging from Somalia could conduct surveillance of most of the Indian Ocean—from the Cape of Good Hope to the Malacca Strait. Visits by TU-95s most likely would be on a periodic basis as has been the case in Cuba and Guinea. Such visits might be more frequent during times of crisis, major Western naval movements or exercises, or Soviet naval space-support activity.

Antisubmarine warfare aircraft, such as the IL-38 operating from Somalia, could provide surface reconnaissance and antisubmarine warfare coverage of the Arabian Sea. These aircraft, as well as TU-16 medium bombers, were based in Egypt until July 1972.

Other restraints on a growing Soviet naval presence include the prior commitment of naval forces to other areas such as the Mediterranean, the requirement to maintain a strategic reserve in home fleet areas, plus the economic and political costs of operating a sizable naval force in the Indian Ocean. Should the US make a substantial permanent increase in its naval presence in the Indian Ocean, the Soviets would probably not be able to match this without reordering their priorities and shifting naval forces from other areas—much as the US itself has to do to operate carriers in the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, the USSR would probably make these adjustments because of the broader implications of super power rivalry.

Arms Limitations

Concern over such a developing naval rivalry, the planned US expansion of the naval base on Diego Garcia, and the recent history of US carrier task force deployments to the Indian Ocean during crises apparently has raised concern among some Soviet officials over the prospects for a naval arms race there. The USSR does not want such a major regional naval rivalry, but Moscow clearly will respond to any increase in the US military presence there.

Several proposals have been put forward to limit super power rivalry in the Indian Ocean. The littoral states, supported by other developing countries, have adopted a series of "Indian Ocean Zone of Peace" resolutions in the UN. These proposals call on the great powers to halt the escalation of their military presence, to eliminate bases and other facilities, and to keep "weapons of mass destruction" from the area.

The Soviets, on occasion, have publicly expressed interest in searching for a solution to

the naval rivalry in the Indian Ocean and have referred to resolving the problem "on an equal basis" with other great powers, namely the US, whose ships operate in the area.

Soviet officials twice raised the question with the US of restraining super power military competition in the Indian Ocean and of discussing bilateral naval limitations when expansion of Diego Garcia was under consideration. At the same time, however, the Soviets have been unresponsive to US requests for clarification and to suggestions from India and Australia that they pursue a mutual restraint with the US. This apparent Soviet lack of serious interest in arms limitations is probably attributable to military opposition within the USSR to such proposals and concern that any limitations placed on military operations in the Indian Ocean could set a dangerous precedent. Soviet spokesmen have shown a particular concern that naval limitations agreed to in the Indian Ocean would restrict their "freedom of the seas" and might lead to calls by neutralist nations for similar restrictions elsewhere.

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